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ABSTRACT

A child's success in learning to read in the first grade appears to be the best predictor of his or her ultimate success in schooling as well as all of the events and outcomes that correlate with that. Yet, across the research literature reviewed for a recent book, "Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print," children's first-grade reading achievement appears to depend most of all on how much they know about reading before they get to school. Differences in reading potential do not seem to be strongly related to poverty, handedness, dialect, gender, intelligence quotient, mental age, or to other such difficult-to-alter circumstances. Differences appeared to be due instead to learning and experience--and specifically to learning and experience with print and print concepts. Such differences can be taught away--provided that teachers have the knowledge, sensitivity, and support to do so. (RS)

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Beginning Reading Instruction in the United States

by Marilyn Jager Adams

A report entitled *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print* has been released as a book through the MIT Press. A summary of this report is available from the Center for the Study of Reading.

Why Was This Report Written?

In 1984, under the auspices of the National Academy of Education, the Center for the Study of Reading produced a report on the status—the strengths and shortcomings—of research and instructional practice in reading education. Following this report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, Congress asked the Department of Education to compile a list of available programs on beginning reading instruction, evaluating each in terms of the cost effectiveness of its phonics component. In partial response to this requirement, I was asked by the Department of Education—through the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois—to produce a report on the role of phonics instruction in beginning reading. Specifically, my charge was to address the following questions: Is phonics a worthwhile component of beginning reading instruction? If so, why? How might such instruction be most effectively realized?

It should be recognized that the word "phonics" is a red flag to some in the field of reading education. Because of this, the report has been and will be associated with a certain amount of controversy. What is phonics? Phonics is instruction intended to help children understand the fundamentally alphabetic nature of our writing system and, through that understanding, to internalize the correspondences between frequent spelling patterns and the speech patterns—the words, syllables, and phonemes—that those spellings represent. The debate over phonics centers on whether its instruction promotes or impedes development of the attitudes and abilities required for reading comprehension. Given that the goal of reading instruction is to foster a willingness to read and to further the skill and disposition to do so purposefully, reflectively, and productively, I did not dismiss this debate. Instead I centered the report on it.

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What Did I Do?

To produce this report, I spent a year reviewing the history of the debate, the literature on the relative effectiveness of different instructional approaches, the theory and research on the knowledge and processes involved in skillful reading, and the various literatures relevant to reading acquisition.

What made this task especially challenging and worthwhile is that the relevant information and arguments are scattered across so many fields. More specifically, the relevant research literature divides itself not only across fields of education, psychology, and linguistics, but also the fields of computer science and anthropology. I can report that across disciplines, and despite differences in terminology and perspective, I found considerable overlap in both issues and answers. Still more valuable, I believe, were the ways in which these literatures complemented one another. Collectively presented and interrelated, they support a much richer and more refined understanding of the issues and challenges we face in designing, delivering, and evaluating our students' reading education.

What Did I Find?

Perhaps the most influential arguments for teaching phonics are based on studies comparing the relative effectiveness of different approaches to teaching beginning reading. These studies can be sorted into two categories. Those in the first category consist of small but focused laboratory studies. Those in the second category have compared the effectiveness of instructional approaches in real classrooms. Many of the classroom studies have been large scale, involving hundreds or thousands of children; they include, for example, the research conducted in the 1960s by Jeanne Chall under the sponsorship of the Carnegie Corporation, the 27 studies of the U.S.O.E. Cooperative Research Program in First-Grade Reading Instruction (1964-1967), and the 22 instructional models evaluated by the Office of Education through the Follow-Through project in the 1970s.

In the quest for answers about instructional effectiveness, these studies offer both good news and bad. The good news is that they suggest, with impressive consistency, that instruc-

tional approaches that include systematic phonics lead to higher achievement in both word recognition and spelling, at least in the early grades, and especially for slower or economically disadvantaged students. The bad news is that the studies do not permit precise identification of the factors underlying the phonics advantage. Whereas the laboratory studies provide clean contrasts of whatever variables they were designed to assess, they leave one wondering about the would-be influence of all those factors that were controlled or absent. Conversely, whereas the classroom studies offer real-world validity, they leave one wondering about the many factors that, though unavoidably present, were uncontrolled or unmeasured. Last but hardly least, the overall advantage of phonics instruction across the studies that compare methods of instruction is relatively small.

With this perspective, I turned to specialized literatures. I will summarize these literatures in three parts, corresponding to research and theory on skillful readers, on poor readers, and on children who have not yet entered school.

Skillful readers. A hallmark of skillful readers is the speed and relative effortlessness with which they typically progress through the written text. Laboratory research indicates that, in doing so, they visually process virtually each and every letter of the text. Further, as their eyes pass over the words, their minds automatically and rather irrepressibly translate the spellings of the words into pronunciations. (This happens at the level of mental activity though not necessarily at the level of tongue activity.) Theory and research affirm that both the speed and effortlessness of these activities are integral to the capacity to read with skillful comprehension.

Skillful readers' speed of fluency enables them to think about whole phrases or sentences at once. The effortlessness of the word recognition process allows skillful readers to focus their active attention on the process of comprehension—on monitoring and assessing the message of the passage.

Poor readers. Research demonstrates that the ability to read English-like nonsense words, such as *zust* and *nell*, is a uniquely powerful discriminator of good from poor readers. Most poor readers have not learned to recognize frequent spelling patterns or to translate spelling patterns to speech patterns. Indeed, many of the symptoms that have variously been ascribed to neurological dysfunction or perceptual deficits are now being traced to insufficient familiarity with the visual forms of individual letters and the ordered, letter-by-letter composition of common English spelling patterns. Similarly, many problems that appear on the face of it to reflect comprehension difficulties are frequently traced to unaffordable efforts, slowness, or incompleteness in the word recognition processes.

Children who have not yet entered school. Identification of predictors of children's eventual success in learning to read has been an active area of research. Three powerful predictors are (1) preschoolers' ability to recognize and name letters of the alphabet; (2) their general knowledge about text (which is the front of the book, whether the story is told by the pictures or the print); and (3) their awareness of phonemes (the speech sounds that correspond roughly to individual letters).

While, however, a preschooler's phonemic awareness may be the best single predictor of how much that child will learn about reading in school, the best predictor of a preschooler's awareness is found to be how much she or he has already learned about reading. Reading aloud with children is known to be the single most important activity for building the knowledge and skills they will need for learning to read. Adding regular doses of "Sesame Street," reading/writing/language activities in preschool, and time spent fooling around with magnetic letters on the refrigerator or playing word and "spelling" games in the car, on a computer, with crayons, and so on, such children will have experienced several thousand more hours of literacy preparation before entering first grade.

Before formal instruction is begun, children should possess a broad, general appreciation of the nature of print. They should be aware of how printed material looks and how it works; that its basic meaningful units are specific, speakable words; and that its words are comprised of letters. Of equal importance, they should have a solid sense of the various functions of print—to entertain, inform, communicate, record—and of the potential value of each of these functions to their own lives. To learn to read, a child must learn first what it means to read and that she or he would like to be able to do so. Our classrooms, from preschool on up, must be designed with these concepts in mind.

What Do These Findings Mean?

In all, a child's success in learning to read in the first grade appears to be the best predictor of her or his ultimate success in schooling as well as all of the events and outcomes that correlate with that. Yet, across the literature I reviewed, children's first-grade reading achievement depends most of all on how much they know about reading before they get to school.

In a way, this conclusion seems disheartening; it seems somehow to beg the American Dream. In another way, however, it is heartening. Differences in reading potential are shown not to be strongly related to poverty, handedness, dialect, gender, IQ, mental age, or other such difficult-to-alter circumstances. They are due instead to learning and experience—and specifically to learning and experience with print and print concepts. They are due to differences that we can teach away—provided, of course, that we have the knowledge, sensitivity, and support to do so.

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